

One Another, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: Submit to One Another in Reverence for Christ

Ephesians 5:15–21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This passage is rich and practical, but it also contains a phrase that is widely misused today, so handle it with care and balance. Your central doctrinal task lies in verse 21: “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Teach it rightly as the mutual humility, deference, and lowliness that mark every Spirit-filled Christian. This is genuine and important: the gospel produces people who do not grasp for position but gladly yield to one another, esteeming others above themselves out of awe for the Lord. Do not soften or skip this. A church full of self-assertion and pride has not understood verse 21.

At the same time, be clear and unembarrassed about what comes next. Paul does not leave “submit to one another” as a vague principle floating free; he immediately applies it to specific relationships, beginning in the very next verse: wives and husbands, then children and parents, then servants and masters (Ephesians 5:22 and following). So the mutual submission of verse 21 does not erase or flatten the distinct, God-given roles Paul then describes, including the headship of the husband and, elsewhere, the roles of men and women in the church (1 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:11–14). Mutual submission and distinct roles are both biblical, and they are not in conflict. Teach this graciously and without apology, but do not turn the class into a culture-war debate; let Scripture set the tone. Help students see that humility is the soil in which God-given order becomes a thing of beauty rather than a battleground.

Two further emphases will serve your students well. First, verses 15 through 18 set the wise, Spirit-filled life against the foolish, drunken one; help students see that being “filled with the Spirit” is the secret to walking wisely, understanding the Lord’s will, and redeeming the time. Second, verse 19 shows that Spirit-filled worship overflows in congregational singing, where we address one another and make melody from the heart. Keep the focus on the “one another” theme, mutual edification in song, as the New Testament pattern of singing praise together. Your formational aim is a community of awake, Spirit-filled, thankful, singing, humble Christians who reverence Christ and gladly defer to one another.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul writes, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15–16). What does it mean to “make the best use of the time,” and why does Paul ground this command in the fact that “the days are evil”?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the image of walking, which Paul uses throughout Ephesians for the whole conduct of life. To “look carefully” how we walk is to live attentively rather than carelessly, deliberately rather than by drift. The fool stumbles through life on autopilot; the wise person lives awake, weighing choices in light of God’s will. Paul is not calling for anxiety but for alertness.

Explain the phrase “making the best use of the time.” The underlying word carries the sense of redeeming or buying up, like a merchant seizing a fleeting opportunity before it is gone. Our days are a limited, non-renewable trust from God. To redeem the time is to spend our hours on what truly matters, on the Lord, on people, on good works, rather than squandering them. It is the opposite of killing time; it is buying it back for the kingdom.

Take seriously Paul’s reason: “because the days are evil.” We do not walk through neutral territory. The age around us is hostile to God, full of temptation and distraction designed to waste God’s people. Precisely because the days are evil, wise living matters more, not less. The wise Christian does not assume the current will carry them in the right direction; they swim against it on purpose.

Apply it concretely. This is not about cramming our schedules but about stewarding our lives toward what lasts. Ask students where their hours actually go, and whether those hours are being redeemed or merely consumed. The point is sober and hopeful at once: our time is short and the days are evil, but a life lived awake to God’s will is never wasted.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian life pictured as a “walk,” a whole manner of conduct before God (Ephesians 4:1; 5:8)
- Wisdom as living deliberately according to God’s will rather than drifting (Ephesians 5:15; Psalm 90:12)
- Time as a limited trust to be redeemed for the kingdom (Colossians 4:5; Ephesians 5:16)
- The evil character of the present age as a reason for alert, intentional living (Galatians 1:4)
- Stewardship of our days as accountability to the Lord (Matthew 25:14–30)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between killing time and redeeming it?
- Why does the fact that “the days are evil” make wise living more urgent, not less?
- Where is the current of this age carrying you, and where do you need to swim against it?

Question 2

Student Question:

Take an honest look at how you spent your hours this past week. Where did you redeem the time, and where did you simply let it leak away? Name one specific way you could walk more wisely.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question turns verse 16 into a mirror over the student's actual calendar. Encourage real honesty rather than guilt. Most of us have hours that genuinely served the Lord and others, and hours that simply leaked away into mindless scrolling, idle distraction, or busyness that accomplished nothing eternal. The aim is to see clearly, not to despair.

Help students distinguish rest from waste. Redeeming the time does not mean filling every minute with frantic activity; God himself gives rest, and Sabbath rhythms are good. The contrast is not work versus rest but intentional living versus careless drift. A restful evening with family can be deeply redeemed; an evening lost to a screen we cannot even remember the next day usually is not. The question is whether our hours are being stewarded toward what matters.

Move toward one concrete change. Resist letting students answer in generalities like "I should manage my time better." Press for one specific, doable adjustment: a regular hour given to prayer or Scripture, a habit of distraction named and curbed, a relationship given the time it deserves. Small, specific changes in how we spend our hours, sustained over time, reshape a life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest self-examination of how we steward our time (2 Corinthians 13:5; Ephesians 5:16)
- The goodness of God-given rest, distinct from careless waste (Mark 6:31; Genesis 2:2-3)
- Intentional living as a fruit of wisdom rather than frantic busyness (Psalm 90:12)
- Faithfulness in small, daily stewardship as preparation for greater things (Luke 16:10)

Discussion Prompts

- Where did your hours genuinely serve the Lord and others this week?
- What is the difference between restful time and wasted time in your own life?
- What is one specific adjustment you could make to walk more wisely with your time?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says, "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (verse 17). How does a Christian come to understand the Lord's will, and what does it tell us that this is set in contrast with being foolish?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice first the striking contrast Paul draws: the alternative to being foolish is not being clever but understanding the will of the Lord. In Scripture, folly is not low intelligence; it is living as though God and his will do not matter. Wisdom is ordering our lives around what God has revealed. So to understand the Lord's will is the very heart of wisdom.

Address how we come to understand his will, because this is where students need clear teaching. God has not left his will hidden or available only through private impressions and new revelations. He has made it known in his completed word, the Scriptures, and especially in the New Testament that governs us under the new covenant (2 Timothy 3:16–17). The Christian understands the Lord's will by immersing themselves in his word, having a mind renewed by it (Romans 12:2), and then obeying what they find there. We do not wait for a voice in the night; we open the book God has already given.

Guard students from two errors here. One is the assumption that God's will is mysterious and unknowable, so we may as well do as we please. The other is the modern expectation of fresh revelations and inner promptings apart from Scripture. The all-sufficient New Testament equips us for every good work; the man of God is made complete by it. To understand the Lord's will is to know and obey what he has already spoken.

Apply it practically. Much of God's will is plain on the page for anyone willing to read and submit: how to be saved, how to live holy lives, how the church is to worship and work, how to treat one another. The honest question is rarely "What is God's will?" but "Am I willing to do it?" Help students see that understanding God's will begins with a heart that intends to obey it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Folly defined as disregard for God's will, not lack of intelligence (Psalm 14:1; Ephesians 5:17)
- The Scriptures, especially the New Testament, as the revealed and sufficient will of God (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- The renewed mind as the means of discerning God's will (Romans 12:2)
- The completeness of God's written word, without need of new revelation today (Jude 3; 2 Peter 1:3)
- A heart willing to obey as the key to understanding the Lord's will (John 7:17)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Scripture treat folly as a spiritual problem rather than merely an intellectual one?
- Where do we actually go to understand the Lord's will, and where is that will already plain?
- Is there a part of God's revealed will you understand clearly but have been slow to obey?

Question 4

Student Question:

Are there areas of your life where you are content to remain “foolish,” not really seeking to understand the Lord’s will because you suspect you might not like the answer? Where do you most need to understand his will?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question exposes a quiet form of folly: the willful kind. Often we do not understand God’s will in some area not because it is hidden but because we have avoided looking, suspecting that his will would cross our own. We keep a door of our lives dim on purpose. Help students name where that door might be, gently and honestly.

Draw out how this works. We are remarkably skilled at not knowing what we do not want to obey. A person may study Scripture diligently on many topics while carefully steering clear of the passages that bear on their finances, their relationships, their speech, or their habits. The folly is not ignorance forced on us; it is ignorance chosen to protect a comfort or a sin. Naming it is the first step toward repentance.

Keep the tone hopeful, not accusing. The goal is not to make students feel exposed but to invite courageous honesty before a good and trustworthy God. His will is not a trap but the path of life. Encourage each student to identify one area where they have avoided asking what the Lord wants, and to resolve to bring it into the light of his word with a willing heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Willful ignorance as a form of folly we choose to protect our comfort or sin (Ephesians 5:17; John 3:19–20)
- The goodness and trustworthiness of God’s will as the path of life (Psalm 19:7–11; Romans 12:2)
- A divided heart that studies God’s word selectively (James 1:22–25)
- Bringing every area of life under the light of Scripture (Psalm 119:105)

Discussion Prompts

- Is there an area of your life you have kept deliberately dim, suspecting God’s will would cross your own?
- Why is it tempting to study Scripture selectively, avoiding the parts that touch our comfort?
- Where do you most need to bring a willing heart and ask, “Lord, what is your will here?”

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul commands, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit” (verse 18). Why does Paul set drunkenness and Spirit-filling as rival ways of living, and what does it mean for a Christian to be “filled with the Spirit”?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by asking why Paul pairs these two at all. They seem an odd couple until we see his point: both are about what fills, controls, and overflows from a person. The drunkard is filled with wine, controlled by it, and it spills out in debauchery, in loss of self-control and ruin. Paul sets a holy rival alongside it: be filled with the Spirit, controlled by him, overflowing instead in song, thanksgiving, and humble love. The contrast is between two masters and two kinds of fullness.

Address what the world seeks in the bottle. People reach for drink to feel alive, to numb pain, to escape the evil days, to loosen up and belong. Paul does not deny the longing; he redirects it. The fullness people chase in wine and find only in emptiness and bondage is truly found in being filled with God's own Spirit. The Spirit does not numb us into stupor; he wakes us up, fills us with real joy, and frees rather than enslaves.

Explain what it means to be filled with the Spirit, carefully and biblically. This is not a call to seek ecstatic experiences, modern sign gifts, or fresh revelations. The indwelling Spirit is given to every Christian in obedience to the gospel (Acts 2:38; Acts 5:32). To be filled with the Spirit is to be increasingly yielded to his control, so that his fruit and his ways more and more fill and govern our lives (Galatians 5:16, 22–25). Note that the parallel passage in Colossians 3:16 describes the same overflow as “the word of Christ dwelling in you richly.” Being filled with the Spirit and being filled with the word go together; the Spirit works through the word he inspired.

Apply it to ordinary life. The fruit of being filled with the Spirit is not strange phenomena but a transformed character: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, self-control, and a heart that sings and gives thanks. Help students see that the Spirit-filled life is the awake, wise, thankful, humble life Paul has been describing all along. The question for each of us is who and what is filling and controlling us day by day.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Drunkenness and Spirit-filling as rival fillings and rival masters (Ephesians 5:18; Luke 21:34)
- The indwelling Spirit given to every Christian in obedience to the gospel (Acts 2:38; Romans 8:9)
- Being filled with the Spirit as ongoing yieldedness to his control, not a one-time ecstatic event (Galatians 5:16, 25)
- The parallel between being filled with the Spirit and the word of Christ dwelling richly (Colossians 3:16)
- The fruit of the Spirit, not sign gifts or new revelation, as the mark of the Spirit-filled life (Galatians 5:22–23)
- The Spirit's work through the inspired word rather than apart from it (Ephesians 6:17; 2 Timothy 3:16–17)

Discussion Prompts

- What do people hope to find in drunkenness that is only truly found in being filled with the Spirit?
- How does being filled with the Spirit go together with the word of Christ dwelling in us richly?
- What does a Spirit-filled life actually look like in ordinary character and conduct?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where do you turn for relief, escape, or fullness when life feels empty or hard? How would being “filled with the Spirit” reshape the way you handle those moments?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the contrast of verse 18 personally. Drunkenness is only one of many counterfeit fullnesses. We all have our go-to escapes when life feels empty or painful: a screen, food, shopping, busyness, entertainment, the approval of others, or a substance. The aim is to help students name honestly where they actually turn for relief, without shame but with clear eyes.

Help them see the pattern Paul exposes. These escapes promise fullness and deliver emptiness; they numb for a moment and leave us more enslaved. The Spirit offers a different kind of fullness, one that does not require us to check out but meets us in the hardness with real comfort, joy, and strength. Being filled with the Spirit is not an escape from life but God’s presence within it.

Move toward a concrete reorientation. The point is not merely to feel guilty about our escapes but to retrain our reflexes, turning to the Lord in the very moments we used to turn elsewhere. Encourage students to identify their most common counterfeit and to plan a Spirit-ward alternative: prayer, Scripture, a call to a brother or sister, a song of thanksgiving. Over time, where we instinctively turn reveals and shapes who we are becoming.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Counterfeit fullnesses that promise life and deliver bondage (Jeremiah 2:13)
- The Spirit’s comfort and strength offered within hardship, not as escape from it (John 14:16–17; 2 Corinthians 1:3–4)
- Retraining our instincts to turn to the Lord rather than to substitutes (Psalm 62:8)
- Thanksgiving and prayer as Spirit-filled responses to difficulty (Philippians 4:6–7)

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you actually turn first when life feels empty or hard?
- How does that escape tend to leave you, and what does it promise that it never delivers?

- What Spirit-ward alternative could you train yourself to reach for in those moments?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says the Spirit-filled life overflows in “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (verse 19). Why does Paul describe congregational singing as something we do toward one another and not only toward God, and what does that teach us about worship in song?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw attention to the surprising direction of verse 19. We naturally think of singing as something we do toward God, and Paul affirms that: we sing and make melody “to the Lord.” But he first describes it horizontally: “addressing one another.” When the church sings, we are not only praising God; we are teaching, encouraging, and building up one another. This fits the heartbeat of the whole study. Even our worship in song is a “one another” act.

Open up what this means for congregational singing. The parallel in Colossians 3:16 makes it explicit: we sing “teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” The words we sing carry truth from heart to heart. When we sing of Christ’s cross, his return, his faithfulness, we are preaching to one another and being strengthened by the voices around us. This is why the words of what we sing matter so much; we are instructing one another even as we praise God.

Note carefully what Paul says the instrument is: “singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.” The New Testament pattern for worship in song is the voices of God’s people, making melody in the heart, the whole congregation lifting praise and edifying one another. This congregational, heart-engaged singing is the apostolic pattern, and it is beautifully suited to the “one another” purpose Paul names, every voice both praising God and building up the brother beside them. Keep the focus there rather than turning this into a music debate; the point is that Spirit-filled people sing together to God and to one another from the heart.

Apply it to how students approach the assembly. If singing is addressing one another, then mumbling, withholding our voice, or treating song as filler robs the brother beside us of encouragement we were meant to give. Spirit-filled singing is engaged, hearty, and aimed both upward to God and outward to the saints. Help students see that their participation in song is a ministry to the whole body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Congregational singing as both praise to God and edification of one another (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16)
- The teaching and admonishing function of the words we sing (Colossians 3:16)

- Singing and making melody in the heart, the voices of God's people, as the New Testament pattern of worship in song (Ephesians 5:19; Hebrews 13:15)
- Heart-engagement, not mere performance, as essential to acceptable worship (John 4:24; Matthew 15:8–9)
- Every member's participation in song as a ministry to the whole body

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change your singing to know you are encouraging the brother or sister beside you?
- Why do the words we sing matter so much if we are teaching and admonishing one another?
- What would it look like for you to sing with full heart, both to the Lord and to the saints?

Question 8

Student Question:

When you sing with the gathered church, are you truly “addressing one another” and singing to the Lord from the heart, or merely going through the motions? What would it look like to sing as Paul describes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses verse 19 into the student's own experience of the assembly. Be honest and gentle: many of us have sung through entire songs while our minds wandered to lunch, to worries, or to nothing at all. The lips moved while the heart slept. Paul calls for singing and making melody “with your heart,” wholehearted and engaged, both toward God and toward the saints around us.

Help students see what disengaged singing costs. When we go through the motions, we miss the encouragement we were meant to receive from the truth in the songs, and we withhold the encouragement we were meant to give the brother beside us. Singing is not a passive interval; it is an active ministry. To sleepwalk through it is to be present in body but absent in the very thing the Spirit-filled life is overflowing into.

Move toward concrete renewal. Encourage students to think about what would help them sing as Paul describes: paying attention to the words, letting them become genuine praise and genuine encouragement, perhaps choosing one phrase each Lord's Day to truly mean. The goal is not stronger voices but more engaged hearts, every member singing to the Lord and to one another on purpose.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wholehearted, engaged singing versus going through the motions (Ephesians 5:19; Matthew 15:8)
- Singing as active ministry to one another, not a passive interval (Colossians 3:16)
- The heart as the seat of acceptable worship (John 4:23–24)
- Our participation in the assembly as something we owe to the whole body (Hebrews 10:24–25)

Discussion Prompts

- Be honest: where does your mind tend to go while the church sings?
- What encouragement do you miss, and fail to give, when you sing on autopilot?
- What is one practical way you could sing more from the heart this Lord's Day?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul closes this section with “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (verse 21), and he immediately applies it to specific relationships in the verses that follow (wives and husbands, children and parents). How does the mutual humility of “submitting to one another” relate to the distinct, God-given roles Paul then describes, so that we honor both without playing one against the other?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, and it must be handled with both clarity and grace, so give it full room. Begin by establishing what verse 21 genuinely teaches. “Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” describes the humble, deferential posture that marks every Spirit-filled Christian. It is the overflow of awe for Christ into our relationships: we do not grasp for position, demand our own way, or lord it over one another, but gladly yield, serve, and esteem others above ourselves (Philippians 2:3–4). This is real and important; the pride that refuses to defer to anyone has not understood the gospel.

Now address the careful balance, because this verse is widely misused to erase the rest of what Paul writes. The mutual submission of verse 21 is not the end of Paul's thought; it is the doorway into it. The very next verses spell out what reverent, submissive humility looks like in specific relationships: wives and husbands, children and parents, servants and masters (Ephesians 5:22 and following). So Paul himself does not treat “submit to one another” as a flat sameness that dissolves all distinctions. He treats it as the humble spirit within which God-given roles are joyfully lived out. To use verse 21 to cancel verses 22 and following is to set Paul against himself.

Be clear and unembarrassed about the roles Paul describes, while keeping a gracious tone. Paul teaches the headship of the husband and the wife's submission to her own husband (Ephesians 5:22–24), grounding it in Christ and the church, and elsewhere the Scriptures teach distinct roles

for men and women in the church (1 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:11–14). Mutual submission and distinct roles are both biblical, and they are not in conflict. Headship in Scripture is not domination; it is Christlike, sacrificial, self-giving leadership that lays down its life (Ephesians 5:25–28). Submission is not inferiority; the Son submits to the Father and is fully equal in deity (1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:28). Help students see that both partners in every God-ordained relationship are called to deep humility, and that order and equality are not enemies.

Apply it pastorally and without polemic. Resist the temptation to turn this into a culture-war argument; let Scripture set the tone and the temperature. The aim is a community in which mutual humility makes God-given order beautiful rather than burdensome, where husbands lead by laying down their lives, where everyone defers to one another in love, and where distinct roles are received as gifts from a wise God rather than fought over. When verse 21 and verses 22 and following are held together as Paul wrote them, both the dignity of mutual submission and the goodness of God-given roles shine. Surrender neither.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mutual submission as the humble, deferential spirit of every Spirit-filled Christian (Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3–4)
- Reverence for Christ as the ground and motive of that submission (Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 5:5–6)
- Verse 21 as the doorway into the specific relationships of verses 22 and following, not a cancellation of them
- The headship of the husband and the wife's submission, modeled on Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22–33)
- Distinct, God-given roles for men and women in the church alongside full equality of worth (1 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:11–14)
- Headship as Christlike, sacrificial, self-giving leadership rather than domination (Ephesians 5:25–28)
- Order and equality as compatible, seen in the Son's submission to the Father (1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:28)

Discussion Prompts

- How is “submit to one another” the doorway into the specific relationships Paul describes next, rather than a cancellation of them?
- Why are mutual humility and distinct God-given roles not in conflict but partners?
- Where do you most need to grow in humble deference, and where in receiving God's design with gladness?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across Ephesians 5:15–21 as a whole: walking wisely, understanding the Lord’s will, being filled with the Spirit, singing to one another, giving thanks, and submitting to one another in reverence for Christ. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage, and what you will do about it this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole lesson into one concrete commitment. Resist letting it stay general. “I want to walk more wisely” is a wish, not a step. Help students name a specific arena and a specific action. The passage offers several doors: hours to redeem, a will of the Lord to understand and obey, a Spirit to be filled with, songs to sing wholeheartedly, thanks to give, and a humility to put on toward others.

Encourage them to connect their answer to whatever pressed hardest. For one student it will be verse 16 and a resolve to redeem wasted hours. For another it will be verse 18 and a longing to be filled with the Spirit rather than numbed by some escape. For another it will be verse 19 and a renewed heart for congregational singing. For another it will be verse 21 and a specific relationship in which to practice humble deference. Let the text drive the application.

Close by lifting their eyes to Christ. The aim of this study is not behavior modification but becoming like Jesus, who walked perfectly awake to the Father’s will, who was full of the Spirit, who gave thanks, and who humbled himself among us as one who serves. Remind students that the same Lord who calls us to this life supplies it by his indwelling Spirit and his ongoing work in us. Send them out not under a heavy load but with one clear step and a confident hope that Christ is forming them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Growing conformity to Christ, who walked wisely and was full of the Spirit, as the goal of the Christian life (Romans 8:29; Luke 4:1)
- The Spirit’s work of producing wisdom, thankfulness, and humility in the obedient believer (Galatians 5:22–23)
- Specific, personal obedience as the proper response to God’s word (James 1:22)
- Christ as both the pattern and the power of the wise, Spirit-filled, humble life he calls us to

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of Ephesians 5:15–21 pressed on your heart most, and why?
- What is the one specific step (an hour to redeem, a fullness to seek, a humility to practice) you will take, and when?
- How will you rely on the indwelling Spirit, rather than your own willpower, as you take it?